

Storing Knowledge

In a fishing community, an interviewing project brings young and old together

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAN ADKINS



The world changes when you drive toward Jonesport from Route 1. Already communities have grown smaller than their counterparts to the south and west; houses are scattered here and there, as if the land had been stretched out, leaving long gaps between homes. The landscape and the light are, uniquely, Downeast Maine.

Sparingly populated Jonesport and Beals Island are true fishing communities, places where fishing—now mostly lobstering—is the economic mainstay, and where generations of fishermen followed their forebearers into the only way of life once imaginable.

In Jonesport, street signs are carved in the shape of lobster boats. Lobster traps serve as winter lawn decorations. In the off-season, lobster boats dominate dooryards. Boat dealers along the roadside display lobsterboat after lobsterboat. Sailboats and motor yachts are in short supply here, although one hand-lettered sign along the road read LOBSTER BOAT YACHT FOR SALE.

There's no escaping the fact that these are fishing towns, and as in many other towns nearby, families here count back generations of living by and from the sea. But what is happening in so many fishing towns everywhere is happening here as well. The fishing culture has been changing for many years and many reasons, including the loss of some traditional fisheries, more stringent regulations and fluctuations in the remaining resources.

And if the fishery no longer offers to provide a good, dependable living, the younger generation is less likely to be enticed into sticking with the family business. The kids know what's available in the rest of the world; even in towns like these, many youngsters know less than they should about the fishery, the fish and the traditional way of life that sustained their families for generations.

Enter the Local Fisheries Knowledge Project (LFKP) at Jonesport-Beals High School, funded by federal grants through the Rural School and Community Trust. This project is connecting youngsters with their town and often family histories through interviews they conduct with older town residents involved in some aspect of the fishery. All the information the students

retrieve from the subjects of their interviews is being loaded into a database at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) for retrieval by scientists doing fisheries research, or by anyone who wants to read them. And the students have other, creative plans for their work.

The brainchild of a senior social scientist with the Office of Science and Technology within NOAA Fisheries, the LFKP began when Susan Abbott-Jamieson retired after 25 years as a professor at the University of Kentucky, took a new job and “heard three conversations going on at once” in her new office. Those conversations included the need for the Fisheries division of NOAA to do more outreach, a need to entice more young people into careers in the marine environment and talk about fishermen criticizing agency staff for failing to listen to or appreciate the knowledge fishermen have about fish, fishing and fish habitat.

“Over the years in Appalachia, I saw the effect of projects like Foxfire, in which students interviewed elders about their disappearing way of life,” said Abbott-Jamieson. “Local fisheries knowledge is difficult for biologists to use, because of the way it's stored—it's usually in the form of stories. I thought we could put together a project that included all three.”

She came up with the Local Fisheries Knowledge Project, an education, outreach and social science project in



which students would interview older community members involved in the fishery, videotape the interviews and share the interviews with the rest of the community. Interviews are transcribed verbatim and posted on the NOAA website (www.st.nmfs.gov/lfkproject) in a database that can be searched using many keywords.

The project is funded by a NOAA grant administered through the project's partner, Rural School and Community Trust, a national organization that works with rural schools throughout the country. During the first two years, Jonesport-Beals was joined in the project by Ellsworth High School, where students also conducted interviews. At Ellsworth High School, all 10th-grade students in English, science and social studies participated during the two-year project.

Of the eight interviews transcribed and loaded onto the NOAA database, six were done by the Ellsworth students, and include a shellfish dealer, two urchin divers, a seafood restaurant owner and a lobsterman. The two Jonesport interviews already posted are with two fishermen—Jonesport's Tuddy Urquhardt, 77, and John Faulkingham, 63, of Beals Island.

Interviews were not the focus of the 2005–2006 student group that worked on the project, partly because of the transcription backlog. This group, larger than previous teams, thought they would branch out to use the information as a fund-raiser, perhaps by preparing a calendar with pictures of the interviewees and studded with local historical information.

"They will use the pictures students have been taking over four years," said Linda Church, teacher of the "Entrepreneurship: We Mean Business" class at Jonesport-Beals High School and a project participant since the beginning. "When we interview the fishermen, we take pictures of the kids and the fishermen." So far, when interviews are conducted, all members of the student team have attended each interview.

"We created a PowerPoint presentation with music," said Church. "We have shown it locally and in Florida at a National Marine Science Foundation meeting." Equipment provided through

the grant included a video camera, a scanner, a printer and a digital still camera.

Soundtrack music that students have recorded as part of the presentation includes Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World" and Dan Fogelberg's "The Reach," said Jim Roberts, local project coordinator, teacher and consultant to the Rural School and Community Trust. "People are in tears when they see it."

The project affords students the opportunity to learn real-life aspects of history, science, social studies, economics, arts and language arts concepts and skills, say the teachers. As part of the curriculum supporting the project, students are assigned to read relevant books, such as Mark Kurlansky's *Cod*.



"There have been so many wonderful side effects of this project. One girl who got involved had no college aspirations. No one in her family had ever attended college," said Roberts. "But she liked the interviewing and discovered she had a talent for it. Now she's enrolled in the New England School of Communications."

Besides recording local fisheries history, the project has energized the historical society. "The Jonesport Historical society was just an idea," Roberts said, "We invited them to come talk about the project. Now the historical society has more than 130 members and NOAA has awarded them a grant of around \$10,000 for technology to support their doing videos." Each year for three years, the students involved in the Local Fisheries Knowledge Project have presented the student work to the

historical society.

Another development was the delivery by a local resident of a set of audiotapes made in the 1960s by a local historian, Alton Norton Jr. Norton interviewed local people who were old-timers back then, and in the background are the sounds of someone building a wooden trap. Students at Shead High School in Eastport offered to enhance the quality of the cassettes and convert them to digital format, using the school's state-of-the-art digital recording studio.

During the first years, students involved in the project were all older, but during the past school year, team members ran the gamut from freshmen to seniors. In Jonesport-Beals, if the interviewees are fishermen, there's a chance the interviewers are, too. At least three members of this year's team are fishermen themselves, and one is the grandson of a woman interviewed last year who spent many years working in a now-defunct sardine cannery. Lawrence Baillargeon, 18, of Beals Island fishes from his boat, *THE HUNTER*. Freshman Alan Crowley, 14 also from Beals Island, fishes 100 traps from his boat, *LITTLE NOVI*. Kristi Smith, 17, is a sixth-generation fisherman who started fishing in sixth grade. She fishes 500 traps from her boat, *LITTLE UGLY*. Pictures and short biographies of team members may be found on the NOAA project website.

"Ultimately, the point of this program is to preserve local knowledge," said Michael J. Kimball, associate professor of anthropology at the University of Maine at Machias. Kimball is the project advisor along with Jim Acheson, author of the iconic book about the Maine lobster fishery, *The Lobster Gangs of Maine*.

"I'm concerned about the science overrunning local knowledge—knowledge not from books, schools and diplomas, but handed down generation to generation," said Kimball.

The relationships students developed while doing the work in their community created "a tremendous appreciation of their heritage," added Kimball. Projects like LFKP are called "place-based education" in teachers' parlance, and their aim is not only to save local

knowledge, but also to give students an appreciation of their home.

Despite his interest in saving the local knowledge of coastal communities, Kimball is neither a Maine nor a coastal native. He was born and brought up in Western Massachusetts, hours away from the coast. But he developed an interest in archaeology that took him to an internship in Edinburgh. On the advice of an advisor, he didn't pursue his graduate studies in Scotland, but in Ireland, where the coast won his heart. He followed Ireland with Bar Harbor's College of the Atlantic and found Downeast Maine "similar to Ireland. I fell in love with it."

Kimball wrote a grant for his department to enable to help him to invite distinguished speakers to his class. "I did one on cultural conflict and consensus," he said. The invited speaker, a Harvard College faculty member, spoke not only to Kimball's class, but also to several of

the LFKP students who were invited to the Machias campus. "We got my senior seminar students involved. The speaker led us through an interesting problem—the issue of coastal access and some beaches being off-limits in Jonesport-Beals. The kids blossomed. They got to talk about what they know best—their families, their town and the issue.

"One of the things traditionally missing from education is the notion that the place where you are is relevant," Kimball said. "If you travel, the place you go finds a place in your heart. It has all to do with your compass and caring for places not otherwise connected to you. If you start here and make connections to things going on in your community, it creates a sense of excitement, exploration and possibilities. We live in an age of information overload. The curious part that wants to go deeper often just goes to sleep. Projects like this ignite the spark."

And if the local kids from the multigenerational fishing families are benefiting from the chance to save their families' histories, they are not the only ones, said Kimball. Like the professor, some students learned to appreciate the coast after living somewhere else.

"One of the kids is from New York City. His dad was in the Coast Guard," said Kimball. "There were five shootings in his New York City school one year, so his dad looked on the Internet for a safe place with a good basketball team! He found Jonesport-Beals. This kid is so passionate about protecting coastal access. It's a powerful thing to watch these kids."

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